DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 477 405 CE 085 061

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TITLE	Giving Credit: A Review of RPL and Credit Transfer in the Vocational Education and Training Sector, 1995-2001.
INSTITUTION	National Centre for Vocational Education Research, Leabrook (Australia).
ISBN	ISBN-1-74096-078-5
PUB DATE	2003-00-00
NOTE	46p.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 252 Kensington Road, Leabrook, South Australia 5068, Australia (Cat. no. 982; $22 Australian). Tel: 08 8333 8400; Fax: 08 8331 9211; e-mail: vet_req@ncver.edu.au; Web site: http://www.ncver.edu.au. For full text: http://www.ncver.edu.au/research/proj/nr1032.pdf
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS
DESCRIPTORS	*Credits; Definitions; Educational Certificates; Educational Policy; Educational Trends; Evaluation Criteria; Foreign Countries; Influences; Literature Reviews; Postsecondary Education; Prerequisites; *Prior Learning; *Recognition (Achievement); Secondary Education; *Student Certification; Student Evaluation; *Transfer Policy; Trend Analysis; *Vocational Education
IDENTIFIERS	*Australia; Australian Qualifications Framework; Prior Learning Assessment

ABSTRACT

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) and credit transfer policy in Australia from 1995 to 2001 was examined through a review of Australian research discourse and an analysis of national data for the period. Selected findings were as follows: (1) RPL and credit transfer are most relevant to vocational education and training (VET) clients seeking full qualifications but are of negligible importance to students enrolled in non-award and subject-only programs; (2) among the factors that affect RPL and credit transfer rates, age appears to be the second in importance after the Australian Qualifications Framework category of the program undertaken; and (3) providers are offering RPL and credit transfer in different amounts. The following recommendations were offered to policymakers: (1) promote the term "assessment" to ensure that all purposes of assessment, including RPL, are clearly placed within the framework; (2) view RPL as a purpose of assessment with an important role in the training cycle, especially as a precursor to training; (3) investigate further analysis of the proposed benefits and barriers to RPL; and (4) conduct qualitative research to determine whether the current services offered by VET providers recognize the full extent of RPL and credit transfer entitlements among VET students. (Thirteen tables/figures are included. The bibliography lists 66 references.) (MN)

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A review of RPL and credit transfer in the vocational education and training sector, 1995 to 2001

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Andrea Bateman
Brian Knight

NCVER

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ISBN 1 74096 078 5 print
ISBN 1 74096 079 3 online

TD/TNC 70.14

Published by NCVER
ABN 87 007 967 311
252 Kensington Road, Leabrook, SA 5068
PO Box 115, Kensington Park, SA 5068, Australia

<http://www.ncver.edu.au>

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Executive summary

This review covers recognition of prior learning (RPL) and credit transfer from 1995 to 2001, giving an overview of Australian research and discourse, together with analysis of the national data for the period.

A significant amount of literature was generated throughout the 1990s, mostly as policy-related material such as national or state training authority frameworks or policies, guidelines for RPL assessment systems and training or promotional materials. Very little critical research studied the conduct and extent of RPL or the perceived benefits, barriers and issues or implications. Most of the literature was also written before the introduction of training packages and the Australian Quality Training Framework. This literature generally centres on defining RPL and how it is similar to or different from assessment.

This review documents how the concepts of RPL and credit transfer have evolved since 1995. Whilst credit transfer is still seen as much as it always was—an administrative process—the concept of RPL has changed as the assessment environment has matured. This review identifies the emerging issues surrounding RPL and discusses its relevance in the current assessment system.

The following proposals are the culmination of a review of the literature and are directed at policy-makers either in training organisations, enterprises and/or national and state or territory training bodies. These proposals attempt to enhance the flexibility of the training and assessment system within the VET sector and assessment practices nationally.

1 *Promote the term assessment to ensure that all purposes of assessment (including RPL) are clearly placed within this framework.* The distinctions between assessment, RPL and credit transfer are artificial and the separation between RPL and assessment should be removed. The term credit transfer should be retained as separate from assessment, as it involves the recognition of formal training previously undertaken, which is deemed equivalent through a set of administrative procedures. Mutual recognition involves the recognition and acceptance of qualifications and statements of attainment by other registered training organisations (RTOs) and it enables individuals to receive national recognition of their achievements; this should be distinct from the other forms of recognition processes.

2 RPL *should be seen as a purpose of assessment with an important role in the training cycle, especially as a precursor to training.* RPL is bound by the same principles and rules of evidence and quality assurance strategies as other assessments.

At a training organisation level, RPL should be included within the broader framework of policies and procedures for assessment. This would then integrate RPL within the broader concept of assessment and ensure that it maintains equivalent credibility and quality assurance strategies to other assessments.

Confidence may be lacking in qualifications obtained via RPL or within specific contexts (e.g. workplaces); however, to ensure valid and generalisable judgements, the focus should be on the validity of the inferences drawn from the evidence. 'Validity of an assessment refers to the use and interpretation of evidence collected . . . it is not simply a property of the assessment task' (Gillis & Bateman 1999). Therefore the focus should be on the collection and interpretation of evidence, on the judgement made and the quality assurance strategies used in the assessment system.

3 *Further analysis of the proposed benefits and barriers to RPL should be investigated.* In general very little of the literature critically analyses whether introducing and establishing an RPL assessment system has fulfilled the desired purposes, either in training organisations or within industry. Such analysis is essential if RPL is to remain separate from an assessment system.

This report also gives an overview of the trends and extent of use of RPL at a national level between 1995 and 2001 inclusively.

The data collection requirements of the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard (AVETMISS 2001) distinguish between RPL and credit transfer. RPL is granted after an assessment or evaluation undertaken by the training provider. Credit transfer arrangements, on the other hand, allow status or credit to be given for satisfactory completion of equivalent subjects at another education or training institution such as another VET provider or a secondary school and is essentially an administrative process.

In practice, the distinction between RPL and an enrolment leading to an assessment and a pass is not clear-cut. It is probably more realistic to view RPL not only as just another form of assessment but also as a form of accelerated progression. This is the practice adopted by some providers. In addition, reported RPL is affected by funding considerations, since providers in most states gain more credits from an enrolment that leads to attendance in a class. Consequently, RPL enrolment figures should be regarded as indicative only.

This having been said, data 1995–2001 shows that:

4 *RPL and credit transfer are features of VET more relevant to clients seeking full qualifications and these processes are assisting these students to a higher extent.*

The incidence of both RPL and credit transfer increases with increasing Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) level:

- Of diploma and higher-level students, 10.6% in 1999 and 9.7% in 2000 had RPL subject enrolments, with a further 6.3% and 6.5% respectively having credit transfer enrolments. The rates are also well above average for students in certificate III and IV programs.
- For students in AQF certificate I or II programs, the corresponding proportions are 2.5% and 2.3% for RPL, and 1.6% and 1.5% for credit transfer, roughly a quarter of the rates for students in diploma and higher-level programs and well below the overall rates.
- RPL and credit transfer are of negligible importance for students enrolled in non-award and subject-only programs, and programs leading to a recognised qualification outside the AQF.

5 *Among the range of factors which affect RPL and credit transfer rates, age appears to be the second in importance after the AQF category of the program undertaken.*

- The incidence of RPL is greatest for students in the 20 to 24 and 25 to 39 age groups (in the range 4.6% to 5.1% from 1997 to 2000), followed by students aged 40 to 64 years, where the rate has been consistently close to the overall rate. The rate for young people up to 19 years of age is lower than for older students, in the range 2.5% to 2.6% from 1997 to 2000, in contrast to an overall rate in the range 3.6% to 4.0% in these years.
- The incidence of credit transfer among the age groups follows a somewhat different pattern, being greatest for 20 to 24 year olds (4.2% in 1999, 4.0% in 2000), followed by young people up to the age of 19 years (3.1% in 1999, 3.0% and 2000), then students aged 25 to 39 years (2.4% in 1999 and 2000) and lowest for students aged 40 to 64 years (1.6% in 1999 and 2000).

6 *Providers are offering RPL and credit transfer in differing amounts.* The proportion of students with RPL enrolments is highest in the TAFE sector, and this has been consistently the case (5.0% of students in 1998 and 1999, 4.3% in 2000). The proportion of students with RPL in the private provider sector is lower than in the TAFE sector, but has grown much more rapidly, from 0.9%

in 1996 to 2.6% in 2000. The incidence of RPL is lowest in the community provider sector, probably because completion of recognised qualifications appears to be even less important for community provider students than in the other two sectors.

7 *Qualitative research is required to determine whether the current services offered by VET providers recognise the full extent of* RPL *and credit transfer entitlements among VET students.*

Context

A competency-based vocational education and training (VET) system was introduced in 1990 as a component of what now is broadly referred to as the national training reform agenda. This reform was intended to produce a more educated and trained workforce that would contribute to Australia's competitiveness. Recognition of prior learning (RPL) and credit transfer were key features of this system.

Prior to the introduction of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) registered training organisations were required to provide RPL procedures. In the early 1990s, training reform processes within Australia emphasised the importance of RPL, which underpinned the system of competency-based training. In the broadly agreed national framework for the recognition of training (NFROT) agreement RPL was one of five initiatives and also appeared as a component principle of another major initiative, 'assessment' (National Training Board 1992).

When NFROT included RPL in its principles, its definition was the first major expression and conception in Australia of the recognition of knowledge and skill regardless of where they were obtained (NTB 1992). NFROT included principles and processes for RPL which broadly followed the Victorian State Training Board model and were based on the seminal project of the then Broadmeadows TAFE and Ford Motor Company (Broadmeadows TAFE 1992, Gibson 1997, Wilson 1996, NTB 1992). The introduction of RPL at a national level was premised on five principles: competence, commitment, access, fairness and support.

With commitment to greater flexibility in the training model and in meeting industry needs, the concept of RPL has continued to evolve and develop within each state and territory. This has meant that RPL has shifted in terms of definition, application and focus in response to state/territory policies and the increased understanding of the role of assessment in a competency-based training system.

Under the recent requirements of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF), registered training organisations are required to provide for a process of RPL. RPL allows the students to gain status or credit in subjects where they already have the required knowledge, skills or experience, usually acquired outside a formal education or training context.

The *AQTF Standards for RTOs* (2001) requires registered training organisations (RTOs) to ensure that RPL is offered to all applicants on enrolment. In addition, the registered training organisation must have a process for RPL and ensure that it 'is structured to minimise time and cost to the applicant' and that it 'provides adequate information and support to enable applicants to gather reliable evidence to support their claim for competencies currently held' (ANTA 2001, p.18).

Review of literature

Introduction

This review of research is confined to the literature of the data collection period addressed within this study. The focus for the review is on establishing what Australian research or discourse has been undertaken on this topic since 1995. Much of the literature prior to this date is well synthesised by Wilson and Lilly (1996) and Kenyon, Saunders and Gibb (1996a).

The literature in this review period (1995–2001) is limited and it is important to note that the majority pre-dates the introduction of training packages in 1997. Very little Australian literature is available that post-dates the introduction of training packages. Therefore there is little discourse relating to potential changes and trends of RPL brought about by training packages.

A significant amount of literature was published throughout the 1990s pertaining to RPL; predominantly examining the nature and models of RPL, definitions, usefulness and barriers. The literature is essentially policy-related material, such as national or state training authority generated frameworks or policies (NSW TAFE 1995a, National Training Board 1992, VEETAC 1993, WA Dept of Training 1996, WA Dept of Training and Employment 2001, SA DETE 1999) and guidelines (DETYA 2001, SA DETE 1999, NSW TAFE 1995b, Kangan Batman Institute of TAFE 1998, Local Government Industry Training Advisory Board [NT] 1995). Also prevalent during this period are materials relating to raising awareness and the training of RPL assessors/co-ordinators (O'Malley & Metcalfe 1995, White 1995) as well as information for potential candidates (Crothers 1996, Kenyon 1996, Batchelor College 1995).

There is limited research relating to specific groups (National Staff Development Committee 1995) or to industry or enterprise RPL processes and assessments. This latter material mostly relates to establishing RPL models for implementation (Clark 1996, Galvin 1996, Ho 1995, Ho & Ho 1997, Keating et al. 1998, Napier & Scott 1995, WA Department of Training 1995).

Only a relatively small amount of Australian research has been conducted into a critical understanding of the extent and conduct of RPL and into the perceived benefits, barriers and issues/implications. Much of the research has been limited to state-wide analysis of implementation (Gibson 1997, Potter 1995, Assessment Centre for Vocational Education 1995), case study analysis (McDonald 1995) of RPL being included in more extensive research related to competency-based training and competency-based assessment (Smith 2000; Smith, Lowrie et al. 1997; Smith, Hill et al.1995), the effects on student outcomes (Smith, Brennan & Oczkowski 1998) and reviewing assessor judgements (Hummel 1995).

Issues relating to RPL

Much of the literature throughout this period focusses on defining RPL, on reviewing the purposes and models of RPL assessment, on the extent of RPL in the VET sector and on the perceived benefits, barriers and implications.

Defining RPL

There is much debate to be found in the literature in terms of defining RPL. A chronological view of the literature demonstrates the various shifts in interpretation of RPL depending on local, industry or state policy as well as depth of understanding of competency-based assessment. These shifts in definition are frequently interpreted by researchers as misunderstandings or indeed confusion of the term.

RPL was defined by the NTB (1992) as the:

> *determination on an individual basis of the competencies obtained by a person through previous formal or in-formal training, work experience and/or life experience. It can lead to advanced standing that a learner is entitled to in relation to a training course.*

The oft-cited VEETAC definition (1991) refers specifically to the 'acknowledgement of the skills and knowledge held' but excludes 'in-formal training' from the definition. Whether the assessment outcome relates to recognition in accredited courses or in all contexts (i.e. industry) is unclear.

Rumsey's (1994, p. 15) definition is also often cited:

> *Recognition of prior learning or experience is a form of assessment used to determine whether a person has achieved, through informal and formal learning and experience, the required competence for entry and/or credit in a recognised course or training program.*

This definition emphasises RPL as an assessment but has limited scope as it does not recognise the notion of other purposes of RPL beyond that of recognition or credit in accredited courses.

In the literature RPL is linked with 'workplace assessments' and with other acronyms such as accreditation of prior learning (APL) and prior learning assessment (PLA). More recently other terms such as 'recognition of current competency' (RCC), 'skills recognition'[1] (SA DETE 1999a, WA DET 2001), and 'recognition' (DETYA 2001, NSW TAFE Commission 1995, Wilson & Lilly 1996) are being used or promoted as alternatives. Recognition of current competency is seen to have gained favour (McDonald 1995, Smith et al. 1997, Wilson & Lilly 1996) especially in industry as it focusses less on 'prior' and 'learning' and more on 'currency' and 'competence'. However, recognition is seen by some as a more appropriate term (DETYA 2001, Wilson & Lilly 1996).

Kirkwood and Kearney (1998) consider that it is not a worthwhile debate to try and separate the two definitions of RPL and RCC, and Kenyon et al. (1996) consider that the differences are not really that important. With the introduction of training packages the division between the two definitions has increasingly blurred.

The recent introduction of the AQTF Standards for registered training organisationss (2001, p. 9) negates the RPL/RCC debate by providing a definition that encompasses both RPL and RCC. This definition emphasises both currency and competence, as well as recognising the context of learning.

RPL means the recognition of competencies currently held, regardless of when or where the learning occurred . . . competencies may be attained in a number of ways. This includes through any combination of formal or informal training and education, work experience or general life experience.

What is unclear from the above definitions is whether the notion of credit transfer is included in the definition of RPL. From the ambiguity of the definitions one could assume that it does.

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1 Skills recognition in Western Australia encompasses: RPL, RCC, Credit transfer, RPL for entry, Overseas equivalence (WA DET 2001).

Credit transfer is mentioned rarely in the literature and is almost subsumed by the term RPL. Thomson, Saunders and Foyster (2001), when explaining the relationship between credit transfer and RPL, consider that recognition can occur in two ways. The first is by individually examining documentation (e.g. certificates, diplomas) related to a training program in which one training organisation recognises another's assessment and gives credit in a related subject or course. The second avenue (where there is lack of documentation) is by conducting an assessment to determine whether the applicant possesses that competency. Thomson et al. (2001) see the distinction as being between the conduct of an assessment of competencies currently held (RPL) and an administrative procedure that recognises old credentials assessed at some time in the past (credit transfer).

Thomson et al. (2001) and Kenyon et al. (1996a) maintain that the delineation between RPL and credit transfer is important for recording and reporting student outcomes. The use of both these terms in recording national data has funding implications across the states and territories.

The Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard (2001) takes a similar position and delineates between RPL and credit transfer for data collection of national vocational and education and training statistics. RPL is granted after an assessment undertaken by the registered training organisation. Credit transfer arrangements, on the other hand, allow status or credit to be given for satisfactory completion of equivalent subjects at another education or training institution, such as some other VET provider or a secondary school, and is essentially an administrative process. The analysis of data presented in the next section is based on this delineation.

What are the purposes of RPL?

A key element in the literature is the emphasis on the purposes of RPL, especially as it relates to training organisations. The range of purposes claimed throughout the literature can be organised according to the stakeholder involved; that is the student, the worker, the enterprise and the training organisation.

Purposes for which individuals seek RPL include:

- seeking placement within a course or program
- seeking to have their skills recognised within the Australian Qualifications Framework
- seeking to have qualifications gained outside Australia
- wishing to be recognised for an industry/enterprise skill/wage classification
- being assessed for staff recruitment, promotion purposes, or as part of a skills audit and training needs analysis. (VEETAC 1993).

The purposes that training organisations and enterprises have for supporting RPL are less well researched, but include:

- assisting individuals in planning their career paths
- enhancing individuals' self-esteem and their capacity to contribute to the organisation
- assisting in creating a learning organisation
- providing a basis for productive human resource management approaches.
- supporting the organisations developing and maintaining a consistent quality of service. (Keating et al. 1998)

In general, very little of the literature critically analyses how the aims of introducing and establishing an RPL assessment system has met the desired purposes either in training organisations or within industry. However a small study (Smith 1999) reviewing RPL across industry sectors notes that companies were most interested in using RPL for initial employment to measure current skill—and least interested in it being for awarding pay increments.

Models of RPL

Much of the review and analysis of RPL pertains to determining the assessment process that best suits the needs of the organisation (training or enterprise) and the target group. In most respects they are based on the five RPL principles outlined in the National Framework for Recognition of Training (NTB 1992). Case study analysis and reports relating to the implementation of RPL models constitute the bulk of the literature (Clark 1996, Crothers 1996, Galvin 1995, Galvin 1996, Ho 1995, Ho & Ho 1997, Keating et al. 1998, Napier & Scott 1995, O'Malley & Metcalfe 1995).

In early attempts to come to grips with the implications of RPL, a number of writers focussed on analysing and refining the stages of the process as well as the key principles that should apply (Goleby et al. 1997, Napier & Scott 1995, Keating et al. 1998, SA DETE 1999a).

The Vocational Education, Employment and Training Advisory Council (1993) outlined a staged approach as an example of good practice in RPL processes. In line with this, O'Malley and Metcalfe (1995) propose six stages (information, initial support and counselling, application, assessment, post-assessment guidance and certification). South Australian DETE (1999) also proposes six stages (information; initial advice and support; application; assessment; post-assessment guidance; and record keeping and monitoring). Keating et al. (1999) identify seven stages in their assessment model for recognising competencies: induction; life skills check; key competency check; self-assessment, of vocational competencies; formal assessment; job and career planning; and training and development planning.

All emphasise the following elements of good practice:

- ◇ information
- ◇ support
- ◇ flexible, non-adversarial, supportive (culturally and gender) appropriate assessment methods, including self-assessment
- ◇ post-assessment support. (Keating et al. 1998).

Very little of the literature, however, addresses concepts or issues in model establishment or implementation that distinguishes RPL assessment models from a broader, flexible assessment model. Keating et al. (1998) continue this argument by emphasising that 'RPL can be seen as a logical subset of an assessment model' and therefore in their report they refer to what was notionally called an RPL process as being an 'assessment model' (p. 20).

Extent of RPL

Research has been conducted regarding the extent of RPL prior to this date and most researchers have commented that the up-take of RPL within training organisations is generally poor and much lower than desired. Concerns with the method of recording and the quality of RPL data have been raised by a number of researchers (Gibson 1997, Potter 1995, Smith et al. 1996, Smith et al. 1997). Wilson and Lilly (1996) note that prior to 1995 there was no common interpretation of RPL and therefore no uniform data collection. Consequently the statistics from this period should be viewed as indicators of trends and activity but regarded with caution.

Smith et al. (1997), in a study of how competency-based training and RPL have changed teaching and learning, noted that provision of RPL was greater for higher-level than lower-level courses. They assumed this is because students entering higher-level courses were more likely to have previous work and life experience. In another study examining the penetration of competency-based training in the VET sector, Smith et al. (1996) founnd that in 1994 the provision of RPL did not vary greatly across fields of study or across public and private providers. However, provision of RPL is greater for Diploma and Advanced Diploma courses, possibly reflecting the nature of the student and level of work life experience.

In Tasmania in 1995 the execution of RPL was fragmented, with incidence of RPL higher for males than female. The general age pattern was low in the 19-years-and-under age group, increasing through to the 35-44 year group and then declining. In addition, courses at the para-professional/higher technician streams accounted for a high proportion of RPL approvals (Potter 1995).

What is occurring in industry and enterprises is less easy to gauge. There is a lack of industry or enterprise data, with much of the information in this area limited to case studies such as Keating et al. (1998), McDonald (1995) and Wilson and Lilly (1996). A small study reported by Smith (1999) used a cross-section of industries to explore the establishment of an assessment centre and found that the majority of organisations used or recognised RPL and that medium-to-large organisations used RPL on a regular basis.

The next section of this report provides a national overview of the extent of RPL within training organisations, its trends and activity for the years 1995–2000 inclusive. This analysis reveals:

- RPL and credit transfer increases with increasing AQF level.
- Age is second in importance after the AQF category among the factors that affect RPL and credit transfer rates.
- RPL is increasingly being implemented by private providers, as well as the TAFE sector.

What are the benefits?

There has been very little research conducted that relates to perceived or potential benefits of RPL. Much of the findings from the research is gleaned from small-scale studies or case studies and tends to be anecdotal in nature (Pithers 1999). Wilson and Lilly (1996, p. ii) consider that 'much of the discussion about benefits lacks depth of analysis, with many of the promoted benefits assumed to be actual benefits'.

Wilson and Lilly (1996), Smith (1999) and McDonald (1995) provide an extensive list of proposed benefits. In brief, the benefits reviewed can be grouped according to the following stakeholders:

- Participants—focussing on formal recognition of work and life skills, elimination of redundant learning and accelerated progression, access and equity as well as boosted self-esteem and motivation.
- Training organisations—focussing on maximising places, closer liaison with industry.
- Employers—emphasising more effective use of resources, speedier training of employees, more effective use of skills and human resource management.

Access and equity

RPL has a strong social justice element (Gibson 1997, Keating et al. 1998) and has been advocated as a means to improve access and equity into vocational education and training (Mattner 1997). This proposed benefit is especially contentious and there are mixed opinions across the literature.

A number of case studies have highlighted relatively successful implementation with specific target groups (Ballantine 1995, NSDC 1996). The study of RPL for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (NSDC 1996) noted that 'many culturally appropriate recognition practices were already in existence' and that there were 'some practical approaches to recognition already being used in relation to skills and knowledge' (NSDC, 1996, pp 3-4). Although the numbers involved in the Western Australian pilot of RPL for entry (WA DET 1995, Ballantine 1995) were small but over half the successful applicants were female and the findings did show positive outcomes especially with the support that was provided to the applicants.

On the other hand whether RPL meets the aim of providing access and equity has come under some criticism. Mattner (1997) questions the said benefits—especially this social justice aspect of RPL. Bloch and Thomson (1994, p.11) note that RPL 'appears to be building barriers against those whom it claims to help.' Bloch and Thomson (1994) refer to the reliance on print-based materials in the RPL process and how applicants from non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESB) or with poor literacy skills may lack confidence to undertake the process. O'Connor (1995) notes that women may be affected by the introduction of RPL and that women from NESB may be particularly disadvantaged.

A small study at Holmesglen Institute of TAFE (MacKenzie, 1994.p.4) found that:

- RPL was not assisting young people to enter the VET system.
- RPL was used for more academic subjects rather than applied subjects.
- RPL was having a minor influence in relation to the number and type of students.
- The claim that underqualified women are especially keen to take advantage of RPL is not supported by the data.

It may be that RPL does not improve access for those it is designed to assist, however very little critical research has been undertaken or data available up to this date to enable an adequate assessment of this claim. The data analysis in the next section on the extent of RPL for the years 1995–2001 suggests RPL experiences vary considerably among the different access and equity groups.

What are the barriers?

Much criticism within the literature of RPL relates more to the various implementation models of RPL assessment and their related administrative processes and issues rather than the concept of RPL. Most of the literature acknowledges that there has been less than desired take-up of RPL and frequently the barriers are cited as being the reason for this.

Barriers related to the RPL assessment process and issues include:

- attitude or level of understanding across training organisations (Assessment Centre for Vocational Education 1995, Potter 1995)
- increased workload on assessors (ACVE 1995, Jones 1997, Smith 1997b)
- poor administrative processes (SATAFE, 1995, p. 2)
- labour intensive and therefore costly (Napier & Scott 1995)
- time consuming (Mattner 1997, Napier & Scott 1995, Smith 1997b))
- inadequate publicity/promotion (Assessment Centre for Vocational Education 1995, Smith et al. 1996, SA TAFE, 1995, p.3, Wilson & Lilly 1996)
- nature of the student and level of experience (Smith et al. 1996)
- different learning styles of students or the need for social interaction (Smith et al. 1997)

- rigour of quality assurance strategies (Kenyon, Saunders & Gibb 1996b)
- risk management model [as proposed by VEETAC] (Potter 1995, Wilson & Lilly 1996)
- funding from state and/or territory training authorities based on a 'time served model' (Gibson 1997, Potter 1995)
- resources and cost (Mattner 1997, Gibson 1997, Wilson & Lilly 1996)
- perceived equivalence of RPL assessment (Davison 1996, Gibson 1997, Hager 1998).

Process

One major criticism of RPL and its implementation is the assessment process itself. Smith (2000, p. 13) in his study of assessment in Queensland notes that the general perception is that the processes undertaken for RPL 'are excessively detailed . . . time-consuming and costly'. He considers that the current assessment processes are a disincentive due to 'their complexity . . . or because of time, cost and effort' making actually enrolling a 'more viable option'. Gibson (1997, p. 15) in his review of Victorian implementation of RPL goes as far to say that it may be 'too complex and bureaucratic'.

Anecdotal evidence across the literature suggests that candidates are in fact enrolling into subjects and undertaking an assessment shortly after, rather than applying for RPL. Smith (1997a) in summarising the research, which focussed on the effects of competency-based training and RPL on teaching and learning, notes that this practice was often easier and possibly cheaper than undertaking formal RPL. Wilson and Lilly (1996, p. 21) consider that statistics do not 'reflect the level of embedded RPL—that is, the level of practical or informal RPL assessment decisions that are not recorded on student record systems'. This view was also supported in the Victorian review of RPL (Gibson 1997), which recognised that less formal recognition occurred and this was not necessarily recorded. It could be assumed therefore that if the process utilised within the RPL model was functioning adequately then these practices may not or would not exist.

Timing and training flexibility

Recognised within the literature is the issue of the timing of assessment provision within the RPL model and how this relates to desired level of flexibility in training provision. This concern is expressed in relation to training organisations (Assessment Centre for Vocational Education 1995, Kenyon et al. 1996b, McDonald 1995, Wilson & Lilly 1996) and is not necessarily an issue for enterprises.

Within training organisations RPL generally occurs prior to training, frequently at the start of a course. This requires students to know and understand the concept of competency-based training and assessment and the role of RPL and also to have the confidence to undertake the process. Compounding this, many short courses or subjects may start without the RPL assessment being completed (McDonald 1995). The research in relation to the implementation of non-standard exemptions in New South Wales (ACVE 1995) notes that this turn-around (in this case it was 3 weeks) was difficult to maintain. This was due to the shortness of the course and of record keeping processes delaying approvals.

Scheduling pre-requisites and additional subjects further complicates the issue and the progress of the candidate. Gibson (1997) in the Victorian study of RPL considers that a major reason for the up-take of RPL is that the focus of the system is in training delivery followed by assessment. The system is not geared to assessment as a stand-alone activity nor is it geared for training based on current competencies. It has been left up to individual training organisations to change program delivery.

Consequently, if RPL is to be effective, the national training system needs to be flexible to cope.

Costs

The issue of the cost to individuals and to organisations when implementing and establishing an RPL system is a contentious point across the literature with mixed opinions and findings. Saving training hours, time away from work and fees are the oft-cited benefits of RPL for candidates and enterprises. For training providers, financial benefits are expressed as increased enrolments and potential for new markets (Gibson 1997, Kenyon et al. 1996b, McDonald 1995). McDonald (1995) provides an extensive list of costs (both financial and non-financial) to individuals, enterprises and training organisations.

However, much of the discourse around cost relates more to funding arrangements within states and territories and who pays for the RPL assessment. Each state and territory has developed policies and administrative procedures in regard to RPL, especially in relation to charges and funding. It was not the intention of this report to review current policies across state and territories; however, such a review would now be timely.

Fees and charges to individuals are often cited as a reason for poor up-take of RPL and are also prominent in access and equity debates. McDonald (1995, p. 13) provides three options for training organisations operating in the VET system in 1994 as the bases for RPL fees and charges:

- on the basis of time spent by an assessor
- on the basis of amount of credit applied for
- on the basis of cost of enrolling in the relevant subjects.

For enterprises, fees and charges do not generally apply to the individual, since assessment is seen as part of a broader human resource management strategy including skills audits and job profiling (Kenyon et al. 1996b). However, costs do apply to the enterprise as they are among the human resources costs but which may not necessarily be specifically identified.

What are the enablers?

A number of researchers have attempted to identify the factors factors whichthat enable an effective RPL process (Love 1995; Ballantine 1995; O'Connor 1995; SA TAFE 1995a, b; Talbot 1997; Harrison 1995; WA DET 1995); however, there has been little critical analysis of enabling factors across the literature.

In some instances much of the information pertaining to enabling factors is gleaned from effective practice models and from strategies to redress the perceived barriers to RPL. Much of the information does not go beyond the RPL process and very little critical analysis of more macro influences are explored. Enabling factors include:

- support of candidates through the process (Talbot 1997)
- streamlined process, user friendly and efficient (SA TAFE 1995)
- processes that are client focussed and provide support for applicants (Ballantine 1995, Hummel 1995, SA TAFE 1995a)
- adjusted student enrolment and counselling procedures (Hummel 1995, Wilson & Lilly 1996)
- maintaining course standards processes to include RPL processes (Wilson & Lilly 1996)
- establishing formal networks (Wilson & Lilly 1996)
- ensuring evidence of prior learning is consistent with assessments within training programs (Wilson & Lilly 1996)

- ensuring consistency across all training organisations (Wilson & Lilly 1996)
- targeting marketing (Ballantine 1995, O'Connor 1995, WA DET 1995))
- non-graded assessments to be used with RPL (Harrison 1995)
- using self-assessment in the process (Ballantine 1995).

Goleby et al. (1997) outlined the following key principles for good practice and enhancing RPL practices:

- client focussed
- automatic
- timely
- affordable
- done well by teachers
- completed in accordance with policy and procedures.

O'Connor (1995) directly addresses concerns that relate to effective RPL processes for disadvantaged groups to include such factors as:

- gender and and culturally inclusive competency standards
- social context of assessment being taken into account when recognition practices are being developed
- support being made available for women
- training of assessors.

A risk management strategy was identified by O'Malley and Metcalfe (1995) and SA TAFE (1995a) as an effective approach to RPL processes. VEETAC (1993) also proposed this strategy for promoting effective RPL. The risk management approach proposes an increasing degree of rigour in two forms:

- amount and quality of evidence
- involvement of additional assessors.

For example, as the risk level increases, additional evidence should be gathered for a panel to review evidence and make a decision leading to a greater degree of confidence.

The recent discussion paper from Queensland (DETQ 2001) proposes a number of strategies that go beyond the RPL process to address the perceived barriers:

- enhancing professional capacity
- providing clear guidelines
- applying effective planning and purchasing mechanisms
- promoting marketing benefits to industry and potential candidates.

Funding arrangements

States and territories registering/accrediting bodies across Australia have developed various policy and practices related to RPL. Associated with this is the issue of funding and resourcing RPL. There is very little critical analysis of the various RPL practices and funding arrangements and their influence on the extent of RPL.

Kenyon et al. (1996, p. 8) provide the last readily available synthesis of state and territory policies and finding models. The AQF advisory board (1997) report noted the diversity of funding policy across the states and/or territories and considered whether it encouraged or constrained RPL provision. It noted that not all states and territories provide equivalent course contact hours, which would in turn encourage training organisations to offer RPL. The report concluded that a 'consistent and transparent policy on funding and resources for RPL . . . would assist with its promotion and providers' motivation'. Ryan and Watson (2001) note that financial incentives seem likely to be an important influence on RPL within and across sectors but they offer little further information on this issue.

It is unclear to what extent the varied funding policies affect the provision of RPL, and this is an area that requires further research before more comment can be made.

Additional implications

Role of trainers and assessors

Many RPL models referred to in the literature include a range of personnel roles such as RPL assessors, RPL advisors/specialists, panel assessments and RPL co-ordinators (Kenyon et al. 1996a,b; McDonald 1995; O'Connor 1995; Williams & Harrison 1995). Adherence to this type of RPL assessment model requires significant training or professional development of these participants (McDonald 1995, O'Connor 1995) and raises the issue of whether RPL assessors are different from or require different skills and knowledge from those of competency-based assessors (Kenyon et al. 1996a,b).

McDonald (1995) does not differentiate between an RPL assessor and a 'normal' assessor and Wilson and Lilly (1996) by omission do not perceive the role as being an issue. The *Training Package for Assessment and Workplace Training* (1998) provides the benchmark for assessors and for RPL assessors. In the assessment guidelines, RPL and recognition of current competency are considered as examples of the different purposes of assessment. In the competency standards, RPL and recognition of current competency appear in the range of variables as one of four purposes of assessment. Quite clearly the requirements for RPL assessors are considered to be the equivalent of assessors.

Kenyon et al. (1996a,b) consider that RPL assessors are different from other assessors, as they have to deal with evaluating evidence of prior learning, especially in terms of relevance and authenticity. Kenyon et al. (1996) consider that RPL assessors in many instances take on a wider role, including being advisor and a co-ordinator. Provision of specialist RPL training is the response to this perception. In the Victorian review of the implementation of RPL, Gibson (1997) noted that there was limited penetration of RPL assessor training. Proposed reasons included providers perceiving RPL as part of a broader assessment system so may consider specialist RPL training unnecessary.

Very little research has been conducted into the effects of RPL on teachers' roles; much of the information available is via case studies. One study conducted by Smith et al. (1997) investigated the effects of competency-based training and RPL on teaching and learning. Their findings were disappointing as little information was found regarding RPL and did not appear to be an issue. In general, perceptions were mixed and reflected the way the training provider organised teacher loads and their RPL process.

Student outcomes

Very little discussion in the literature is evident regarding the effect(s) of granting RPL on student outcomes in VET and there is no agreement amongst researchers as to whether RPL benefits or disadvantages students.

A small study conducted by Smith et al. (1998) provides some insight into the effects of student outcomes and includes a discussion on granting false positive and false negative judgements. The study reviews VET teacher trainees and the effects of granting RPL for components of their practicum (teaching practice). This study is conducted in a graded competency-based assessment environment. The study acknowledges the relatively small sample size (n=45) and the low level of significance, but stresses the support of anecdotal evidence in the findings. The findings suggest that undertaking RPL disadvantaged the candidates, as the granting of RPL was linked to lower marks. The reasons provided by Smith et al. (1998) were mistakes made by assessors in granting the RPL, or that the full practicum was richer (in terms of mentoring, reading and supervision than expected), or that the equivalence of previous work life experience may have been too context-based.

This issue of determining equivalence of experience is explored by Davison (1996) who argues that determining equivalence can never be objective. Also in this paper Davison (1996) cites a number of reports which provide evidence to suggest that people who take up university positions via RPL do at least as well as other students. Most of this evidence however, relates to students articulating from TAFE to higher education.

Little is known about the effect RPL has on student outcomes and further research would be desirable if RPL is to continue to be promoted by national and state/territory training bodies. This issue is closely linked with the quality of RPL assessments.

Quality of RPL assessment and assessor judgements

Lack of confidence in the assessment judgements is often cited as a reason for poor up-take of RPL and, commonly, over-assessing in RPL assessments (Gibson 1997, Ryan & Watson 2001). The discourse is varied, with no agreement on the degree of equivalence of learning or of assessment. Issues include the limited nature of work and life experience and learning as well as the perceived equivalence of qualifications (Davison 1996, Gibson 1997, Smith et al. 1998). On the other hand an over-rigorous RPL assessment model is cited as a barrier for RPL up-take (Kenyon et al. 1996b).

One small study addresses the issue of equivalent judgements of assessors from NSW TAFE and from enterprises (Hummel 1995). This study reviewed the judgements of two assessors (for each candidate) of ten candidates. The findings indicated that industry assessors were more rigorous in their judgements than TAFE assessors, however, the researchers considered it as evidence of parity of assessment judgements between TAFE and enterprise assessors.

Very little of the literature addresses the quality of RPL assessment especially in terms of validity and reliability. Opinion is varied, with some writers claiming that RPL is no more than a form of assessment and is not intrinsically different, while others note differences in terms of validity of evidence and reliability of judgements (Kenyon et al. 1996b).

Hager (1998) considers that formal learning is more valued than informal learning as informal learning is more contextualised than institutional learning and therefore this learning may not be easily transferred to different situations and contexts. This lack of generalisability is further explored by

Thomson et al. (2001) in a research study of assessors within training organisations and the retail industry. Thomson et al. (2001) reviews the validity of RPL assessments against the criteria of generalisability[2] and external consistency[3].

Thomson et al. (2001) question:

- Using RPL or recognition of current competency to assess skills that are enterprise specific and hence lacking in generalisability and external consistency
- Non-comparability of RPL or recognition of current competency assessments results against those assessed in the 'mainstream way'. The reliability[4] of such assessments will always be doubtful because the individuals involved have obtained their skills through two different processes and there is no cost-effective way of verifying the comparability of results obtained in two distinctly separate ways.

The findings of this research indicate that there is little recognition of the issues related to assessing company-specific requirements. In addition, it was concluded that assessors who 'gained a qualification with a substantial component of company-specific RPL or recognition of current competency were unlikely to be able to deal effectively with generalisability and external consistency types of validity' (Thomson et al. 2001, p. 35).

Discussion

As a result of the analysis of the literature, the data and the researchers' experience in the VET sector, the researchers propose the following issues and solutions for discussion.

RPL: recognition or assessment?

As previously mentioned, much of the literature attempts to explain and define RPL, drawing distinctions between RPL and recognition of current competency. Much of the discourse relates to defining exactly what an RPL assessment model is and what, therefore, are the desired emphases.

Kirkwood and Kearney (1998) consider that there 'is significant confusion and inconsistency over the use of such terms' (p. 3). More recent research indicates that knowledge of RPL is continuing to grow, but there is still no 'universally agreed understanding about the use of RPL' (Thomson et al. 2001). To minimise the confusion between RPL and recognition of current competency the term 'recognition' has been recommended by researchers as an alternative to encompass the terms RPL and recognition of current competency (DETYA 2001, Kirkwood & Kearney 1998, Wilson & Lilly 1996). Smith et al. (1997, p. 6) however, consider that this option is 'unsatisfactory' but pose no alternative.

Keating et al. (1998) in their research report regarding the development of their assessment model considered using assessment and RPL in juxtaposition; however, on reflection decided to omit the term RPL and refer only to assessment. RPL was clearly seen as a sub-set of their assessment model. Their reasoning was to avoid some of the confusion caused by various interpretations of RPL, assessment and recognition of current competency as well as to recognise that an assessment system could accommodate evidence gathering procedures and decisions normally related to RPL.

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2 This evidence relates to generalisability over different types of people, under different conditions. For example, will conducting the assessments under different conditions affect the result?

3 External consistency evidence is defined as the relationships of assessment results to the results of other variables. For example, are the results of an assessment consistent with similar assessments of the same candidates?

4 Reliability evidence is defined as reliability over time, assessors and content domain. For example, will different assessors arrive at the same result when assessing the performance of an individual?

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Assessment has a well-established process based on defined standards, which include:

- having a clear purpose
- identifying the evidence required
- using appropriate evidence-gathering methods
- interpreting the evidence and making a judgement
- recording the outcome
- reporting to key stakeholders (adapted from Gillis & Bateman 1999).

This definition of the assessment process allows for the provision of all purposes of assessments and as Keating et al. (1998) suggest, a flexible and broad assessment system, policy and procedures should be able to accommodate all purposes of assessments, in particular RPL.

'Assessment' can be seen as an encompassing term for all purposes and contexts of assessment. Bateman (1999, p. 3) places RPL with all other purposes and contexts of assessment, such as:

- workplace assessment
- on-the-job/off-the-job assessment
- recognition of prior learning (RPL)
- recognition of current competency
- performance assessments
- portfolio assessment
- front-end assessments
- up-front assessments
- diagnostic assessments
- formative assessments
- summative assessments.

Regardless of the terminology, all the above are assessments. Within the national training framework all require adherence to Standard 8.1 of the *Australian Quality Training Framework: Standards for registered training organisations* (ANTA 2001), especially the principles of assessment (validity, reliability, fairness and flexibility) and the rules of evidence (validity, currency, authenticity and sufficiency). What is different in the above list is not only the context for assessment but also the purpose of assessment (Bateman 1999) and the variation in emphases on the timing and the nature and mix of evidence (Bateman 1999, Kirkwood & Kearney 1998).

Unfortunately the recent introduction of the *Australian Quality Training Framework: Standards for registered training organisations* (2001) separates and distinguishes RPL from other purposes of assessment. Standard 8.2, which specifically relates to RPL (and by definition recognition of current competency), implicitly requires additional or different processes from those already existing for assessment. This artificial separation between assessment and RPL clearly confuses and detracts from the integration of RPL into the assessment system and from assessment being an integral part of training. Such a distinction of terminology can only continue to confuse and complicate the role and process of assessment wherever it occurs in the training cycle.

Has RPL served its purpose?

In the early stages of competency-based training and assessment the focus on RPL attempted to redress the focus on more traditional methods of assessment. Research indicates that assessors will tend to select assessment methods with which they have the most experience and familiarity. Therefore assessors reinforce practice by regularly using familiar assessment methods (Gillis et al. 1997).

Early competency-based assessment literature refers to the selection of assessment methods and tasks to generate evidence with which to form a judgement. Discussion surrounded the issue of how many assessment events or pieces of evidence should be used (Rumsey 1994), focussing assessors, not on the varied mix of assessment evidence collected from over a range of a candidate's time and experience, but on developing a task to elicit evidence. Suggested early assessment methods and tasks included observation, skills tests and questioning. Assessment methods such as evaluation of qualifications, portfolio of work, referees' reports and work history were seen as RPL evidence rather than part of a mix of evidence (Rumsey 1994). The focus of RPL therefore in the early stages of competency-based assessment was to draw attention to other assessment methods such as portfolios, challenge tests, interviews and previous documentation.

However, in recent years a number of assessment tools produced as part of the non-endorsed components of training packages take a more holistic view of the collection of evidence. Examples include the *Assessment guides for the rural training package* and the horticulture training package <http://www.rtca.com.au>. Assessment judgements are now based on the collection of previous documentation and, predominantly, questioning and observation. The emphasis in these guides is that assessment is not a 'once-off event' but rather the continuing collection of evidence and the making of a judgement (Bateman 1999). The evidence displays a mix of what was previously direct, indirect and supplementary, but is now referred to in the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs assessment project materials as 'evidence collected by the candidate or evidence collected by the assessor' (DETYA 2001, p.136).

As the competency-based assessment system matures and with the increasing flexibility of the training system, RPL as separate from other forms of assessment may have served its purpose. Keating et al. (1998) recognise sthis maturity of the training system and note that 'Australia has been amongst the first nations to adopt a competency-based training system' and is 'more advanced than most if not all other countries in its approach towards the recognition of skills in the workplace' (p. 26). They argue that the lexicon and debate surrounding competency-based assessment, RPL and recognition of current competency suggest a 'high degree of conceptual activity' (p. 26).

The research suggests that RPL is not a particularly contentious or difficult issue with trainers and assessors (Smith et al. 1997) with many assessors viewing RPL as part of the broader assessment process. The lack of information or mixed findings suggests that trainers and assessors are coping with the concept of RPL assessments but may be more negative about the processes involved. In many instances it is suggested that in training organisations informal RPL processes are occurring and unrecorded with pa[illegible]recognition embedded in good teaching and assessment practice (Wilson & Lilly 1996, Smith 1997a). These findings suggest that there is no uniform resistance to RPL per se but there may be resistance to the processes developed specifically for RPL.

Gibson notes that it was intended that RPL would be a purpose of assessment for inclusion in the mainstream of assessment within the training system (Gibson 1997). He proposes that assessment should be viewed as a standard part of service delivery—indeed it should be considered integral to the education and training system. Assessment therefore should be provided as a precursor to enrolment in training and at various stages within the training cycle. Prospective and enrolled learners could then access assessment processes to gain recognition of their competencies.

In summary

With the increased maturity of the competency-based assessment system and the increased confidence of assessors it could be argued that RPL as a distinct concept is no longer relevant.

McDonald (1995) proposes that in the long term RPL should 'become embedded within a wider framework' which might be encompassed by the term 'assessment' and be simply viewed as one of the mechanisms by which candidates can demonstrate competence. RPL should be incorporated into the broader framework of assessment; its policy and procedures.

RPL: the way forward

The following proposals are the culmination of a review of the literature and data and are directed at policy makers either in training organisations, enterprises and/or national and state or territory training bodies. The proposals are made in an attempt to enhance the flexibility of the training and assessment system within the VET sector and assessment practices nationally.

1 Promote the term assessment to ensure that all purposes of assessment (including RPL) are clearly placed within this framework. The distinction between assessment, RPL and credit transfer is an artificial separation. The separation between RPL and assessment should be removed. The term credit transfer should be retained as separate from assessment as it involves the recognition of formal training previous undertaken which is deemed equivalent through a set of administrative procedures. Mutual recognition involves the recognition and acceptance of other registered training organisastions qualifications and Statements of Attainment and enables individuals to receive national recognition of their achievements; this should be distinct from the other forms of recognition processes.

2 RPL should be seen as a purpose of assessment with an important role in the training cycle, especially as a precursor to training. RPL is bound by the same principles and rules of evidence and quality assurance strategies as other assessments.

At a training organisation level, RPL should be included within the broader system framework of policies and procedures established for assessment. This would then integrate RPL within the broader concept of assessment and ensure that it maintains equivalence of credibility and quality assurance strategies of other assessments.

Confidence may be lacking in qualifications obtained via RPL or within specific contexts (eg workplaces), however the focus should be on the validity of the inferences made from the evidence to ensure valid and generalisable judgements. 'Validity of an assessment refers to the use and interpretation of evidence collected . . . it is not simply a property of the assessment task' (Gillis & Bateman 1999). Therefore the focus should be on the collection and interpretation of evidence and the judgement. made and the quality assurance strategies utilised within the assessment system.

3 Further analysis of the proposed benefits and barriers to RPL should be investigated. In general very little of the literature critically analyses how the aims of introducing and establishing an RPL assessment system have met the desired purposes either in training organisations or within industry, especially if it is to remain separate from an assessment system.

What the statistics show

Background

This section provides a quantitative dimension to the role of RPL and credit transfer in the public VET system. The analysis is based on data submitted to the national collection of VET data for 1995 to 2001, inclusive. The scope for this collection is all activity in the public VET system, and encompasses the following market segments:

- *Provider sectors*: all delivery by TAFE and other government providers, community providers and other registered training organisations who have been allocated public funds to deliver VET programs.
- *Funding sources:* all delivery funded from state/territory and Commonwealth allocations for VET (often referred to as 'ANTA-agreement delivery'), all delivery funded from state/territory and Commonwealth specific-purpose allocations for VET and fee-for-service delivery by TAFE, other government and community providers.
- *Qualification levels:* delivery which leads to an AQF or equivalent qualification, delivery which leads to other recognised qualifications and delivery which is part of non-award VET programs.

The various segments of the public VET system are important for the present analysis because, as will be seen, RPL and credit transfer mainly occur among TAFE and other government providers and among older students who are enrolled in programs which can lead to a recognised qualification.

Under the Australian Qualifications Training Framework (AQTF), students undertaking VET programs can gain credit for a subject[1]. Once granted, the result is intended to have the same status as a subject pass when determining eligibility for recognised qualifications or when issuing certification for the skills which a person has.

As previously noted, the national data collection requirements specified in the AVETMIS Standard distinguish between RPL (an assessment) and credit transfer (an administrative process):

- Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is based on evidence which confirms that the student already has the required knowledge and skills. RPL involves an assessment or some other form of evaluation of the student's knowledge and skills. The AVETMIS Standard does not capture information about 'partial RPL' situations, such as the granting of RPL for units or elements of competency which form part of a larger unit of delivery.
- Credit transfer arrangements are based on completion of the same subjects with another VET provider (known as 'mutual recognition' under the AQTF), or of equivalent subjects at another education or training institution such as some other VET provider, a higher education institution or a secondary school. Credit transfer arrangements can also encompass overseas courses or subjects, such as those administered by the National Office of Overseas Skills

[1] The term 'subject' is used here to refer collectively to modules, the traditional unit of delivery in VET, and to units of competency, the outputs specified in national training packages, which are the building blocks of national training package qualifications. The term 'program' will be used to refer collectively to any course, training package qualification or group of subjects undertaken by a student, including 'subject-only' programs, where the student enrols in one or more subjects without enrolling formally in a course.

Recognition (NOOSR). Each Australian state and territory has a reciprocal recognition authority to support mutual recognition arrangements within and across the various education and training sectors. Granting credit through credit transfer arrangements is essentially an administrative process.

Work undertaken by NCVER (unpublished) indicates that, in practice, the distinction between RPL and an enrolment leading to an assessment and a pass is not clear-cut, and probably a more realistic view is to regard RPL as a form of accelerated progression. This is the practice adopted by some providers. Because of this, and the 'partial RPL' scenario noted above, RPL figures reported in the national data collected under AVETMISS should be regarded as indicative only. Reported RPL is also affected by funding considerations, as discussed below.

It should also be noted that for the earlier years under consideration (1995 to 1997, inclusive) not all providers were in a position to distinguish between RPL and an assessment leading to a pass in the data submitted to the national database. As a result, at least part of the increase in the incidence of RPL in earlier years is due to improvements in reporting systems.

The scope for the analysis which follows is based on subject results reported by providers in the public vocational education and training sector. These include:

- institutes/colleges of technical and further education (TAFE)
- other government providers of VET (e.g. university VET divisions, agricultural colleges in some states, the VET part of multi-sector education and training providers)
- community education providers, where there is an administrative connection or funding arrangement with the state training authority
- other providers (mainly private providers) in receipt of government funds to deliver VET programs
- VET provision to school students where they are enrolled with providers in the above categories.

To ensure consistency of scope over time, secondary school data (i.e. VET in schools) submitted by some states is excluded. As a result of this exclusion, the figures presented in this report differ from those presented in NCVER statistical publications. Other exclusions include overseas campuses, non-VET programs (also known as 'stream 1000'), students whose only enrolments are for credit transfer or for the purposes of being issued with a recognised qualification and fee-for-service delivery by private providers (a small amount of this last category is outside the scope of the national VET collection but is reported, incidentally, to the national database).

Overall trends

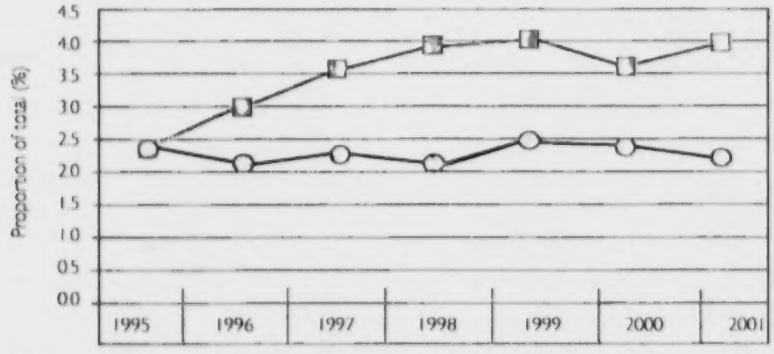
Students with RPL and credit transfer

The number of students with one or more RPL subjects increased consistently, from 30,000 in 1995 to 65,200 in 1999 (figure 1). In 2000, the number of students with RPL subject enrolments fell, by 3,000 to 62,200, down by 4.6% on 1999, but increased again in 2001, to 66,400. The reasons for this drop are unknown.

RPL students as a proportion of the total also grew during the period, from 2.4% in 1995 to around 4.0% in 1998, 1999 and 2001, which now appears to be the trend figure. However, as previously noted, part of the increase in the earlier years (i.e. 1995 to 1996 and 1996 to 1997) is due to the development of systems by providers to separately record and report RPL outputs in student record systems. The fall in the number of students with RPL in 2000 also caused the proportion to fall, to 3.6%.

On the other hand, the number of students with credit transfer (but not RPL – see note to figure 1) has grown only slightly, hovering around 30,000 from 1995 to 1998 and increasing to around 40,000 in 1999 and 2000, then falling to 36,900 in 2001 (2.2% of students). The proportion of students with credit transfer has been more stable, in the range 2.1% to 2.5%, than the proportion with RPL.

Figure 1: Proportion of students with RPL and credit transfer subjects, 1995 to 2001



	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Students with RPL ('000)	29.95	40.13	51.74	59.69	65.21	62.24	66.40
Students with RPL (%)	2.4	3.0	3.6	4.0	4.0	3.6	4.0
Credit transfer students ('000)	30.55	28.53	33.16	31.74	40.37	41.25	36.93
Credit transfer students (%)	2.4	2.1	2.3	2.1	2.5	2.4	2.2
Total students	1272.73	1340.84	1449.15	1509.75	1619.74	1713.36	1679.15

Note: Scope for figure 1 includes all students in the public VET sector, excluding schools data submitted by some States and Territories, and students whose only subjects were for credit transfer. Owing to the phased implementation of national data collection arrangements, statistics for 1995 do not include government-funded delivery by private providers. Students with both RPL and credit transfer subjects are included in students with RPL.

Subject enrolments

Subject results show that while RPL and credit transfer arrangements are important, overall they are relatively small in comparison with the major subject results, including an assessment leading to a pass (figure 2). On the other hand, successful completion of non-assessed subjects (e.g. work experience, field placement and other time-on-task subjects), which is reported nationally under the heading 'no assessment – satisfactory completion of class hours', is also relatively small and similar in number to RPL or credit transfer subjects[2].

Over the period 1995 to 2001 (figure 2, and the underlying statistics, not shown):

- Subject passes have increased consistently in number, from 4.14 million in 1995 to 7.82 million in 2001, in line with the consistent increase in total subject enrolments. In recent years passes have comprised around 60% of all subject enrolments and around 84% of subject completions.
- Subject results of satisfactory completion without an assessment have been more constant, with a low of 0.51 million in 1998, a high of 0.75 million in 2000 and a fall to 0.66 million in 2001 (changes to the reporting standard from 1999 have affected the apparent trend, which was reasonably flat until 1998).

2. Changes to the AVETMIS Standard from 1999 must be taken into account when analysing subject completions over time, but do not alter the main trends.

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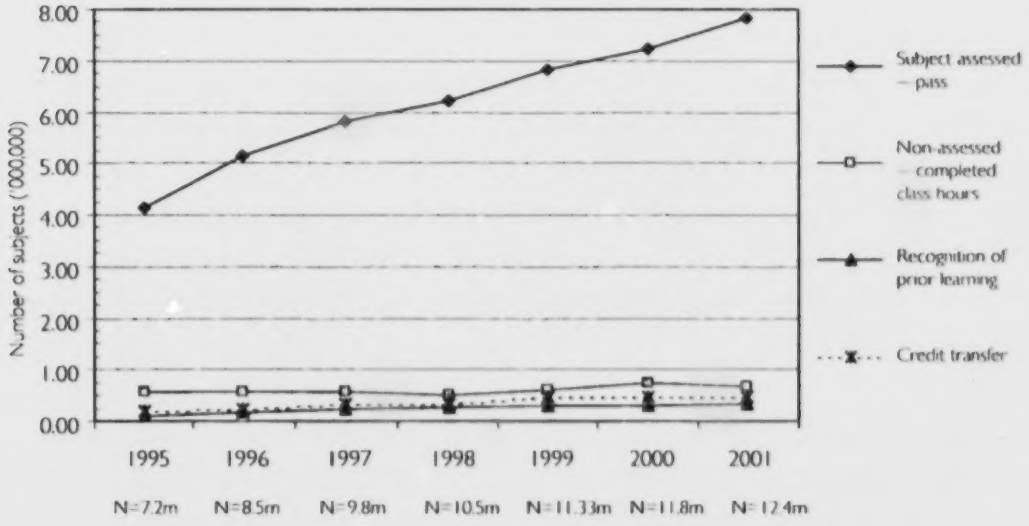
- RPL subjects have increased consistently in number, from 0.11 million in 1995 to 0.33 million in 2001. RPL as a proportion of all subject enrolments has been constant, at 2.6%, from 1998 to 2000 and 2.7% in 2001. However, as a proportion of subject completions, RPL has fluctuated somewhat more, in the range 3.3% to 3.8% from 1997 to 2001.
- Credit transfer shows a similar trend to RPL: subject enrolments increased from 0.19 million in 1995 to 0.47 million in 2000 and 0.46 million in 2001. In 1999 and 2000 these enrolments represented 4.0% of all subject enrolments, and 5.5% and 5.3%, respectively, of all subject completions.

The trends for RPL or credit transfer subjects as a proportion of the total provide a picture which is similar to that obtained from the trends at the student level (p.24).

Figure 2: Number of completed or recognised subjects, 1995 to 2001



Annual hours

Annual hours are used by ANTA as the measure of vocational education and training delivery, and by state training authorities for funding purposes. They are based on the standard curriculum hours for each subject when undertaken in standard, supervised delivery mode (usually in a classroom or instruction site), although some students undertake subjects in self-paced learning, flexible delivery or distance learning modes.

The extent to which RPL is funded by state training authorities or included in delivery measures varies among the states. As a result, RPL tends to be under-reported since providers gain more credits from an enrolment which leads to attendance in a class. Whether the extent to which students seek RPL is affected by funding factors or fees charged is unknown.

In the annual performance report submitted by ANTA to the Commonwealth parliament, each RPL subject is counted at 10% of the standard curriculum hours, to a maximum of 10 hours. However, if RPL is regarded as a form of accelerated progression, there are strong arguments for counting the full curriculum hours in the same way as for other forms of self-paced learning.

All these considerations point up the limitations of annual hours as a measure of VET provision and outputs. However, since annual hours are the standard measure currently in use, in the notes which follow, the full curriculum hours have been applied to each RPL and credit transfer subject. The key trends are as follows:

- The proportion of total annual hours associated with RPL rose from 1.5% in 1995 to 2.7% in 2001, while for credit transfer the increase was less pronounced, rising from 2.6% in 1996 to 3.5% in 1999, then falling to 3.1% in 2001.
- The combined annual hours for RPL and credit transfer as a proportion of the combined hours for all successful subject completions also increased, from 6.2% in 1995 to be in the range 8.4 to 8.5% from 1998 to 2000, but falling to 8.0% in 2001.

As with the trends for the number of students and module enrolments, these figures suggest that the incidence of RPL and credit transfer in the public VET system, at least in terms of proportions, has stabilised.

Table 1: Annual hours by subject result, 1995 to 2001

Subject result	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
	Proportion of year cohort N (%)						
Pass	54.3	56.6	57.2	57.1	58.9	60.4	61.3
Completed class hours	10.2	8.0	6.9	5.7	5.1	4.9	4.8
Recognition of prior learning	1.5	1.8	2.1	2.5	2.5	2.6	2.7
Credit transfer	2.7	2.6	3.0	3.2	3.5	3.4	3.1
Sub-total – successful completion	68.8	68.9	69.3	68.5	69.9	71.3	71.8
Not assessed – continuing	6.6	6.0	5.3	7.3	6.9	6.3	6.3
Other (withdrawn, fail etc)	24.6	25.0	25.5	24.2	23.2	22.4	21.9
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**
N ('000,000)	**270.62**	**284.99**	**301.48**	**308.80**	**324.84**	**336.31**	**367.60**
RPL & credit transfer as a proportion of all subject completions (%)	6.2	6.4	7.4	8.4	8.5	8.4	8.0

RPL and credit transfer students by sex and age

Although the proportion of students with RPL enrolments has varied in the period under consideration, the number of females relative to males with RPL has been almost equal (figure 3). The graph shows that females are slightly more likely than males to have RPL but the difference is negligible in terms of its materiality. It should be noted that the drop in the proportion of students with RPL from 1999 to 2000 also signalled a drop in the number of students with RPL, for both males and females (from 32,700 to 30,900 for females, and 32,400 to 31,200 for males).

For credit transfer, the difference in favour of females is slightly greater than for RPL, but certainly not major, although it was over 0.4 percentage points in 1997 and again in 2001.

In contrast to the male and female patterns, a student's age is found to have an important bearing on the likelihood of having RPL or credit transfer enrolments (table 2).

- The incidence of RPL is greatest, and effectively the same, for students in the 20 to 24 and 25 to 39 age groups (in the range 4.6% to 5.1% from 1997 to 2001).
- The next most important age group for RPL is students aged 40 to 64 years, where the rate has been consistently close to the overall rate.
- As would be expected, the rate for young people up to 19 years of age is lower than for older students, falling in the range 2.5% to 2.6% from 1997 to 2001, in contrast to an overall rate in the range 3.6% to 4.0% in these years.
- However, the incidence of credit transfer follows a somewhat different pattern, being greatest for 20 to 24 year olds (4.0% in 2000, 3.3% in 2001), followed by young people up to the age of 19 years (3.0% in 2000, 2.9% and 2001), then students aged 25 to 39 years (2.4% in 1999 and 2000, 2.1% in 2001) and lowest for students aged 40 to 64 years (1.6% in 1999, 2000 and 2001).

Among the range of factors which affect RPL and credit transfer rates, age appears to be the second in importance after the AQF category of the program undertaken (p.31).

Figure 3: **Proportion of students with subject enrolments granted RPL or credit transfer, by sex, 1995 to 2001**

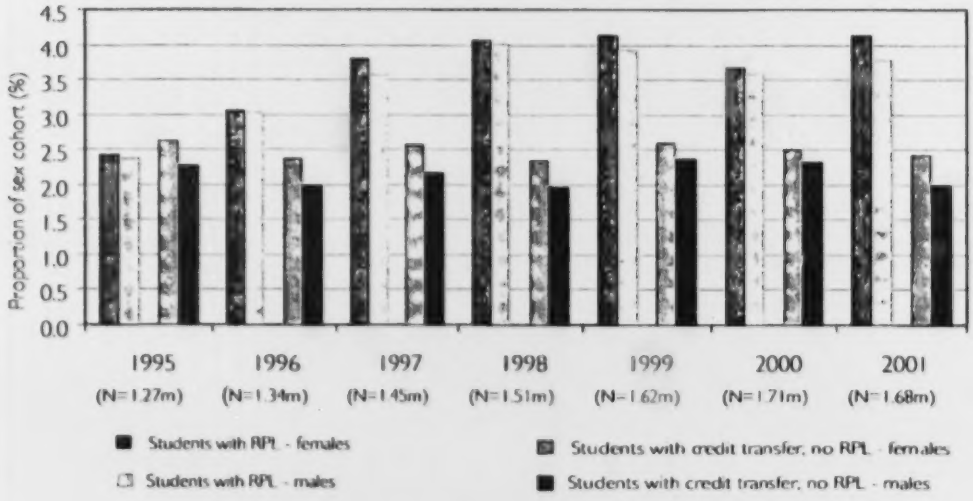


Table 2: **Incidence of RPL and credit transfer subject enrolments, by age group, 1995 to 2001**

Age at 30 June	Students with RPL subjects							Students with credit transfer subjects						
	1995	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*
	Proportion of age cohort (per cent)							*Proportion of age cohort (per cent)*						
Up to 19 yrs	1.3	1.6	2.5	2.6	2.5	2.2	2.1	2.6	2.7	3.2	2.8	3.1	3.0	2.9
20 to 24 years	3.2	3.8	4.6	5.1	4.9	4.5	4.6	3.7	3.1	3.6	3.2	4.2	4.0	3.3
25 to 39 years	3.1	3.9	4.6	5.0	5.0	4.6	5.0	2.5	2.1	2.3	2.1	2.4	2.4	2.1
40 to 64 years	2.4	3.0	3.6	3.9	4.2	3.7	4.3	1.8	1.5	1.6	1.4	1.6	1.6	1.6
Other (a)	0.5	0.6	0.8	0.8	0.9	1.3	1.4	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.4	0.3	0.3
All ages	2.4	3.0	3.6	4.0	4.0	3.6	4.0	2.4	2.1	2.3	2.1	2.5	2.4	2.2
N ('000,000)	1.27	1.34	1.45	1.51	1.62	1.71	1.68	1.27	1.34	1.45	1.51	1.62	1.71	1.68

Note (a): includes students whose reported age is unknown, is less than five years or more than 64 years.

Training provider sector

There are significant variations among the training provider sectors in the proportion of students who are granted RPL (table 3). The proportion of students with RPL is highest in the TAFE sector, and this has been consistently the case:

- In the TAFE and other government sector, 5.0% of students in 1998 and 1999 had subject enrolments with an RPL outcome. The reasons for the drop to 4.3% in 2000 are unknown, but the figure of 4.7% in 2001 approaches, again, the 1998-99 levels.
- The proportion of students with RPL in the private provider sector is lower than in the TAFE sector, but has grown much more rapidly, from 0.9% in 1996 to 3.0% in 2001.
- The incidence of RPL is lowest in the community provider sector, probably as a consequence of the fact that completion of recognised qualifications appears to be even less important for community provider students than in the other two sectors. However, in comparison with earlier years, the incidence of RPL in the community provider sector increased dramatically in recent years, from 0.2% of students in 1999 to 0.7% in 2000 and 0.6% in 2001.

Table 3: Students with RPL subject outcomes, by provider sector, 1996 to 2001

	% of all students			% of annual cohort with RPL					
Sector	*1996*	*1998*	*2000*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*
Community providers	15.3	15.3	13.2	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.7	0.6
Private providers	(a) 1.7	8.6	9.6	0.9	1.7	1.9	2.4	2.6	3.0
TAFE & other government	82.9	76.1	77.2	3.6	4.4	5.0	5.0	4.3	4.7
All public providers	100.0	100.0	100.0	3.0	3.6	4.0	4.0	3.6	4.0
No. of students ('000)	**1,340.8**	**1,509.7**	**1,713.4**	**40.1**	**51.7**	**59.7**	**65.2**	**62.2**	**66.4**

Note (a): understated, as 1996 was the first year in which private providers in receipt of public funds were included in the national VET data collection.

Some variation in the incidence of RPL and credit transfer for males and females is observed among the three major sectors. For example, in 2001:

- In the private provider sector, the proportion of males and females with RPL enrolments was effectively the same (2.9% and 3.1% respectively), and similarly for credit transfer (2.0%).
- By contrast, in the TAFE sector, females are somewhat more likely than males to have RPL (5.2% and 4.2%, respectively), and credit transfer enrolments also (3.0% and 2.2%, respectively).
- In the community provider sector, female RPL students outnumber males. However, the number of students with RPL is relatively small and does not allow conclusions to be drawn with any confidence.

RPL and credit transfer by field of study

As with the AQF category, the incidence of RPL and credit transfer varies considerably among the fields of study, ranging from 1.5% (combined rate) for VET multi-field education programs to 12.5% for veterinary science and animal care programs. In fact, the incidence of RPL and credit transfer is close to or higher than the overall rate of 6.0% for all fields of study except VET multi-field education. The very different pattern for VET multi-field education is a consequence of the fact that this field of study includes many general education and preparatory courses. These courses are often taken by young people who are less likely to have previous education or training, or equivalent experiences, which would entitle them to RPL or credit transfer.

Table 4: Students with RPL and credit transfer by field of study of major course, 2000

Field of study for major course undertaken in 2000 [a]	RPL	Credit transfer *no RPL*	No RPL or credit *transfer*	Total	% of total students
			Proportion of row total (%)		
No major course, or 'subject only' [b]	0.1	0.0	99.8	100.0	5.0
Land & marine resources, animal husbandry	3.7	2.3	94.0	100.0	5.3
Architecture, building	3.4	2.4	94.2	100.0	4.8
Art, humanities and social sciences	3.5	2.2	94.2	100.0	6.8
Business, administration, economics	3.8	3.2	93.0	100.0	20.3
Education	8.4	1.9	89.8	100.0	2.6
Engineering, surveying	4.8	3.3	91.9	100.0	11.7
Health, community services	6.6	3.3	90.1	100.0	8.1
Law, legal studies	4.4	4.8	90.8	100.0	0.6
Science	4.5	3.3	92.1	100.0	6.8
Veterinary science, animal care	8.3	4.2	87.5	100.0	0.2
Services, hospitality, transportation	3.0	2.0	95.0	100.0	16.7
VET multi-field education	0.9	0.6	98.5	100.0	11.1
All programs	**3.6**	**2.4**	**94.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**
Number of students ('000)	**62.2**	**41.3**	**1,609.9**	**1,713.4**	

Notes

(a): Where students have undertaken more than one VET program in the year, the program with the highest AQF level is taken first. If there is still a tie, the program with the largest number of enrolment hours is taken, followed by the program which is not VET multi-field education.

(b): For some students who have undertaken more than one course in a year, it is not possible to determine a 'major course' for the year. For 'module-only' activity, where the student enrols in modules but not a course, a field of study cannot be assigned as the field of study classification used in AVETMISS is assigned at the course level. The new Australian Classification of Education (ASCED) developed by the ABS will resolve this difficulty.

RPL without any credit transfer as well is more prominent among certain fields of study than others, including (in 2000, table 4):

- Education (8.4% of students with RPL) and veterinary science and animal care (8.3%). However, the number of students in these fields of study is relatively small (2.6% and 0.2% of total students, respectively).

- Health and community services, where 6.6% of students had RPL. The number of students here is much greater than in the two fields noted above (8.1% of the total).
- Science (4.5%) and engineering and surveying (4.8%) are two other fields of study with above-average numbers of students with RPL. These fields of study account for 6.8% and 11.7% of students, respectively.
- Most of the remaining fields of study have RPL rates which are close to the overall rate. An exception is services, hospitality and transportation, where the rate is 3.0%, in contrast to 3.6% overall. This field of study is the second largest, accounting for 16.7% of students.

As noted above, it is unlikely that the incidence of RPL among VET multi-field education students could be much higher. Whether the incidence of RPL can, or should be, greater among the other fields of study, particularly those with below-average rates, is not a question which can be answered from the available information.

RPL and credit transfer by qualification category

The incidence of both RPL and credit transfer increases with increasing AQF level (figure 4). For example, 9.7% of diploma and higher level students in 2000 and 10.1% in 2001 had RPL subjects, with a further 6.5% and 5.2% respectively having credit transfer subjects. By contrast, for students in AQF certificate I or II programs, the corresponding proportions are 2.3% and 1.9% for RPL, and 1.5% and 1.4% for credit transfer, roughly a quarter the rates for students in diploma and higher level programs and well below the overall rates.

Even lower rates are observed for students undertaking recognised programs which do not lead to an AQF or equivalent level qualification. Here the incidence of RPL is 1.2% and 0.8% for 2000 and 2001, respectively, and 0.7% and 0.5% for credit transfer. Clearly, RPL and credit transfer are of minor importance for the students undertaking these programs.

Finally, RPL and credit transfer are of practically no importance for students enrolled in non-award and subject-only programs, with rates close to zero for all years from 1995 to 2001 for both RPL and credit transfer.

Figure 4: Students with RPL and credit transfer by qualification level of major course, 2000 and 2001

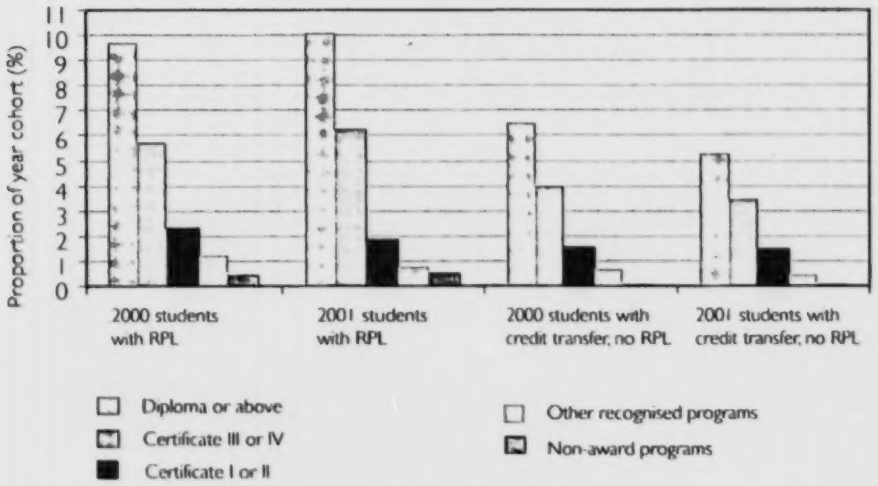


Table 5: Source statistics for figure 4 and for earlier years

	Students with RPL subjects							Students with credit transfer subject						
AQF category of major course (a)	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*
	Proportion of year cohort N (per cent)							*Proportion of year cohort N (per cent)*						
Diploma & above	6.2	7.6	8.8	10.1	10.6	9.7	10.1	5.4	4.7	6.1	5.1	6.3	6.5	5.2
Certificate III/IV	3.5	4.9	5.9	6.5	6.3	5.7	6.3	3.9	3.6	3.7	3.4	4.0	4.0	3.5
Certificate I/II (b)	2.1	2.4	3.2	2.9	2.5	2.3	1.9	2.4	2.1	1.9	1.7	1.6	1.5	1.4
Non-AQF awards	0.5	0.6	0.8	0.5	1.0	1.2	0.8	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.3	0.6	0.7	0.5
Non-award	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.3	0.4	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.1
All programs	**2.4**	**3.0**	**3.6**	**4.0**	**4.0**	**3.6**	**4.0**	**2.4**	**2.1**	**2.3**	**2.1**	**2.5**	**2.4**	**2.2**
N ('000,000)	**1.27**	**1.34**	**1.45**	**1.51**	**1.62**	**1.71**	**1.68**	**1.27**	**1.34**	**1.45**	**1.51**	**1.62**	**1.71**	**1.68**

Notes:
(a) As for table 4 re. 'major course'.
(b) RATE courses reported under the AVETMISS qualification category '42 Certificate – other' have been apportioned to the AQF certificate I/II and III/IV categories in the ratio of 2:1. The number of courses in this category has been declining with the transition from RATE to ARF/AQTF accreditation arrangements.

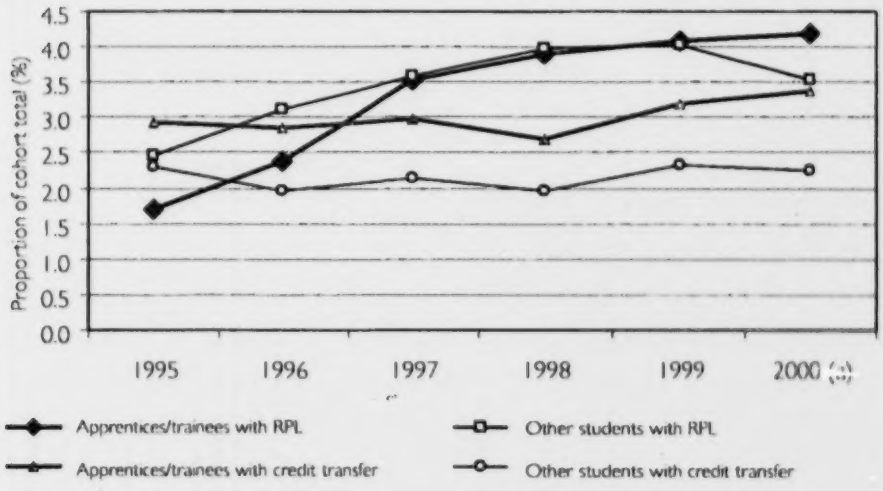
RPL and credit transfer among apprentices and trainees

The importance of RPL for apprentices and trainees relative to other students has changed over time (figure 5). In 1995 and 1996 the incidence of RPL was lower among apprentices and trainees (1.7% and 2.4% respectively) relative to other students (2.5% and 3.1%, respectively). By contrast, from 1997 to 1999, the incidence of RPL was effectively the same for apprentices and trainees and other students, despite the fact that the proportion of VET students with RPL continued to rise. The trend was reversed in 2000, with 4.2% of apprentices and trainees having RPL subject enrolments, in contrast to 3.5% for other students.

An important factor in this shift is likely to be the increasing number of apprentices and trainees in recent years, many of whom are older and hence more likely to have skills and experience which would qualify them for RPL. By contrast, traditional apprentices, who dominated the apprenticeship and traineeship system in the past, were generally young and less likely to have skills and experience which would qualify them for RPL.

A different trend is observed for the incidence of credit transfer among apprentices and trainees relative to other students. In all years from 1995 to 2001, the incidence of credit transfer has been higher among apprentices and trainees than among other students (for example, in 1999 the rates for the two groups were 3.2% and 2.3%, respectively). Among other students, the rate for credit transfer has been relatively constant over the years 1995 to 2000, in the range 2.0% to 2.3%. After a nadir of 2.7% in 1998, the incidence of credit transfer for apprentices and trainees increased to 3.2% in 1999 and 3.4% in 1999. As with RPL, changes in the composition of the apprentice and trainee population are the most likely explanation for this shift.

Figure 5: **Proportion of students with RPL and credit transfer, apprentices/trainees and other students, 1995 to 2000**



Note (a): preliminary figures only for apprentices and trainees enrolled with VET providers in 2000. Also, figures are not yet available for apprentices and trainees enrolled with VET providers in 2001.

RPL and credit transfer among specific student groups

Here we consider the extent to which students from specific access and equity groups are granted RPL and credit transfer for subjects (table 6). It is found that rates of RPL and credit transfer among these student segments in some cases are lower than among students overall:

- In 1999, students with a reported disability are slightly less likely to have RPL than students without a reported disability (3.5% and 4.0%, respectively), and are about equally likely to obtain credit transfer (2.5%, in contrast to 2.4%). The pattern in 2000 is similar.
- Students from a non-English-speaking background are about equally likely to obtain RPL (3.9% compared with 4.2% in 1999, and 3.7% compared with 3.6% in 2000). On the other hand, the credit transfer pattern appears to have changed from 1999 to 2000.
- Indigenous students are much less likely to obtain either RPL or credit transfer (in 2000, 2.1% in contrast to 3.7% for RPL, 1.9% in contrast to 2.5% for credit transfer).

Where the rates for access and equity groups are lower, there are two possible explanations:

- Providers are less inclined to offer recognition services to students with these backgrounds, which if the case, would imply inequitable treatment of these students.
- Alternatively, and more likely to be the case, is that students from disadvantaged backgrounds generally have not had the opportunities to acquire the skills and knowledge which would qualify them for RPL or credit transfer.

Further research is needed to ascertain the correct explanation: it is not an issue which can be investigated from the data currently available.

Table 6: Proportion of student segments with RPL or credit transfer, 1999 to 2001

RPL or credit transfer subjects	Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander			Reported disability			English-speaking background			Total students
	Yes	No	Not known	Yes	No	Not known	Yes	No	Not known	
1999 students										
RPL	1.9	4.0	4.3	3.5	4.0	4.2	3.9	4.2	4.2	4.0
Credit transfer no RPL	1.8	2.5	2.8	2.5	2.4	3.0	2.2	2.9	3.1	2.5
Neither RPL or CT	96.3	93.5	92.9	94.0	93.6	92.8	93.8	92.9	92.6	93.5
All students	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**
2000 students										
RPL	2.1	3.7	3.6	3.1	3.6	3.7	3.7	3.6	3.5	3.6
Credit transfer no RPL	1.9	2.5	2.3	2.5	2.4	2.4	2.9	2.4	2.2	2.4
Neither RPL or CT	96.1	93.8	94.1	94.4	94.0	93.9	93.4	94.0	94.2	94.0
All students	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**
2001 students										
RPL	2.1	3.8	5.0	3.1	3.7	5.7	3.7	3.9	5.1	4.0
Credit transfer no RPL	1.8	2.4	1.3	2.6	2.3	1.6	2.3	2.8	1.2	2.2
Neither RPL nor CT	96.1	93.8	93.7	94.3	94.0	92.7	94.0	93.3	93.7	93.8
All students	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**

Scope: as for previous tables and figures, i.e. includes all VET students except for the schools data submitted by some states and territories and students whose only subject results were for credit transfer.

Effect of RPL and credit transfer on outputs

Outputs from vocational education and training take two major forms, depending on the needs of the individual:

- Successful completion of subjects, where 'successful completion' refers to an assessment leading to a pass, an assessment leading to RPL and for non-assessed subjects, satisfactory completion of class hours (e.g. completing a prescribed amount of work experience). Credit transfer is not counted as an output as it reflects subjects which have been passed in some other education or training institution.
- Successful completion of a recognised qualification. This may be the qualification associated with a particular course of study or an approved exit qualification if only part of the course has been completed. For a variety of reasons, qualification completions reported in the national collection of VET provider data are understated.

Although eligibility for recognised qualifications is understated in the national collection of data from VET providers, there is sufficient information to show that students who are granted RPL or credit transfer for one or more subjects in their first year of enrolment are considerably more likely to complete a recognised qualification (tables 6 and 7). The cohort used for the analysis is the VET students who enrolled in 1997, either for the first time or after a break of at least two years.

However, it is important to put this finding into perspective, as the number of students granted RPL or credit transfer in their first year who have a qualification completion reported is quite small. Moreover, other work undertaken by the NCVER (unpublished) indicates that the major factors which increase the likelihood of completing a qualification include being enrolled for more than one year, undertaking a course at higher AQF levels, being an apprentice or trainee and starting VET while young, while still at school or as a school leaver. Being granted RPL and credit transfer is clearly a major plus factor for those students who are entitled to it, but the impact of this group on overall qualification completions is relatively small.

The key finding for students who enrolled for one year only (i.e. 1997) is that the proportion with RPL increases with the AQF level of the output attained, from 1.5% or less for students who completed all subjects undertaken or attained a recognised, non-AQF qualification, to 10.5% for those attining an AQF Certificate III or IV qualification and 14.6% for those attaining an AQF Diploma or Advanced Diploma. A similar trend is observed for credit transfer (below 1%, rising to 6.3% for those attaining a Diploma or Advanced Diploma qualification).

Table 7: Reported outputs for students enrolled in 1997 only, by RPL and credit transfer

RPL or credit transfer subjects	Diploma & above	Cert III /IV or equiv't	Cert I /II or equiv't	Other recogned qualif'ns	All subjects completed	Some subjects completed	No subjects completed	Outputs unknown	All students
RPL	14.6	10.5	4.9	1.0	1.5	3.8	n/a	n/a	1.5
CT no RPL	6.3	3.2	2.3	0.7	0.5	1.4	0.4	0.0	0.6
None	79.1	86.3	92.8	98.3	98.0	94.9	99.6	100.0	97.8
All	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**
%	**0.4**	**3.4**	**4.3**	**13.8**	**42.5**	**18.4**	**17.2**	**pro rated**	**100.0**
N ('000)	**1.52**	**12.81**	**16.43**	**52.06**	**160.66**	**69.65**	**65.21**	**143.13**	**521.45**

The key findings for students who enrolled for more than one year are equally pronounced (table 7). Students completing a diploma or higher level qualification are most likely to have RPL or credit transfer. The rate is highest (13.3% with RPL plus 7.9% with credit transfer) for students enrolled for two years or for three years with gaps. The corresponding rates for students enrolled continuously for three years are slightly lower (11.1% and 7.1%, respectively) and lower again for students enrolled continuously for four years or more (9.2% and 4.9%, respectively). Students with no qualification completions reported are also the least likely to have RPL enrolments (2.5% of the 1997 students in this output category), and also credit transfer enrolments (1.2% of the 1997 students in this output category).

Variations among the AQF levels of qualifications attained are also evident and follow the patterns observed for single-year students (i.e. the incidence of RPL and credit transfer increases with the level of qualification attained).

Table 8: Reported qualification completions for a large sample of multi-year students starting in 1997, by RPL and credit transfer

Years enrolled in VET	RPL and credit transfer subjects	Diploma and above	Certificate III or IV or equivalent	Certificate I or II or equivalent	Other recognised qualifications	No qualification completion reported	All students
Enrolled for 2 years or 3 years with a gap		*Column per cent (proportion of N)*					
	RPL	13.3	8.1	4.2	4.7	2.5	3.3
	CT no RPL	7.9	3.7	2.0	3.7	1.2	1.6
	None	78.8	88.2	93.8	91.6	96.3	95.1
	All	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	Row %	2.2	8.9	8.3	12.8	67.8	100.0
	N ('000)	**5.31**	**21.60**	**20.04**	**31.09**	**164.12**	**242.15**
Enrolment continuous for 3 years		*Column per cent (proportion of N)*					
	RPL	11.1	6.6	3.7	4.3	3.7	4.7
	CT no RPL	7.1	3.6	2.7	4.0	2.1	2.8
	None	81.8	89.7	93.7	91.8	94.3	92.5
	All	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	Row %	7.3	20.8	9.5	9.7	52.8	100.0
	N ('000)	**4.18**	**11.93**	**5.4**	**5.546**	**30.32**	**57.41**
Enrolment continuous for 4 years or more		*Column per cent (proportion of N)*					
	RPL	9.2	5.3	3.9	3.4	3.3	4.4
	CT no RPL	4.9	3.1	2.1	4.0	1.9	2.5
	None	85.9	91.6	93.9	92.6	94.7	93.1
	All	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	Row %	9.4	25.6	11.3	10.7	43.0	100.0
	N ('000)	**5.29**	**14.47**	**6.38**	**6.05**	**24.30**	**56.49**

Note: students who started in 1997 are taken for this analysis because at least fours years must be allowed before a reasonably complete picture of students' achievements is obtained.

Summary of what the statistics show

The statistics confirm that RPL and credit transfer are not relevant to all students. This is particularly evident when the type of VET program undertaken is taken into account. The rates for RPL and credit transfer are close to zero for students undertaking non-award and non-AQF programs, and very low for students undertaking AQF certificate I and II programs. Among students who are less concerned with AQF and equivalent qualifications, which includes many older students and those enrolled with community providers, RPL and credit transfer rates also tend to be lower.

On the other hand, the relevance of RPL and credit transfer increases with the AQF level: for diploma and higher level programs, around one in 10 students have obtained RPL and over one in five have credit transfer. Although qualification completions information is currently understated, it is also clear that these trends flow through into students obtaining recognised qualifications. All of this suggests that one of the primary objectives of RPL and credit transfer, namely, to assist students gain recognised qualifications without having to restudy for skills they already have, is being met through the current arrangements, at least to an extent.

RPL and credit transfer patterns for students in various access and equity groups are mixed. Some of the findings are encouraging, the slightly higher rate of RPL among students from non-English-speaking backgrounds in 2000, for example, but others, such as the below average rates for indigenous students, lead to a more negative view. Clearly, more work needs to be done to establish whether the current arrangements are meeting the needs of these students.

Establishing the trends in RPL and credit transfer over time is problematic because of data limitations for earlier years. However, the information we do have suggests that RPL rates grew initially and stabilised at around 4% from 1999 onwards, while credit transfer has been more constant, at around 2.5% of students.

Do the current recognition services offered by VET providers recognise all the RPL and credit transfer which VET students are entitled to and want? This is not a question which the statistics can answer: rather, it is something which only more detailed, qualitative research can establish.

Summary and conclusions

This review of recognition of prior learning (RPL) and credit transfer in vocational education and training covers the period from from 1995 to 2001, giving an overview of Australian research and discourse, together with analysis of the national data for the period.

A significant amount of literature was generated throughout the 1990s, mostly as policy-related material such as national or state training authority frameworks or policies, guidelines for RPL assessment systems and training or promotional materials. Very little critical research studied the conduct and extent of RPL or the perceived benefits, barriers and issues or implications. Most of the literature was also written before the introduction of training packages and the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF). The literature generally centres on defining RPL and how it is similar to or different from assessment.

Significantly, a recent study commissioned by the Australian National Training Authority on drivers and barriers to RPL implementation (unpublished) established that the major driver of RPL implementation is now the AQTF standards for registered training organisations . One of the standards which registered training organisations must satisfy is the provision of recognition services to students to ensure that existing knowledge and skills are formally recognised so that students do not have to repeat what they have already studied or learnt.

The present review documents how the concepts of RPL and credit transfer have evolved since 1995. Whilst credit transfer is still seen as much as it always was—an administrative process—the concept of RPL has changed as the assessment environment has matured. This review identifies the emerging issues surrounding RPL and discusses its relevance in the current assessment system.

The following proposals are the culmination of a review of the literature and are directed at policy-makers either in training organisations, enterprises and/or national and state or territory training bodies. These proposals attempt to enhance the flexibility of the training and assessment system within the VET sector and assessment practices nationally.

1 *Promote the term assessment to ensure that all purposes of assessment (including RPL) are clearly placed within this framework.* The distinction between assessment and RPL is artificial and a strong case could be made for its removal. The term *credit transfer* should be retained as separate from *assessment*, as it involves the recognition of formal training previously undertaken, which is deemed equivalent through a set of administrative procedures. Mutual recognition involves the recognition and acceptance of qualifications and statements of attainment by other registered training organisations (RTOs) and it enables individuals to receive national recognition of their achievements; this should be distinct from the other forms of recognition processes.

2 *RPL should be seen as a purpose of assessment with an important role in the training cycle, especially as a precursor to training.* RPL is bound by the same principles and rules of evidence and quality assurance strategies as other assessments.

   At a training organisation level, RPL should be included within the broader framework of policies and procedures for assessment. This would then integrate RPL within the broader concept of assessment and ensure that it maintains equivalent credibility and quality assurance strategies to other assessments.

In some quarters there may be a lack of confidence in qualifications obtained via RPL or within specific contexts (e.g. workplaces). However, to ensure valid and generalisable judgements, the focus should be on the validity of the inferences drawn from the evidence. 'Validity of an assessment refers to the use and interpretation of evidence collected … it is not simply a property of the assessment task' (Gillis & Bateman 1999). Therefore the focus should be on the collection and interpretation of evidence, on the judgement made and the quality assurance strategies used in the assessment system, not the context *per se*.

3 *Further analysis of the proposed benefits and barriers to RPL should be investigated.* In general very little of the literature critically analyses whether introducing and establishing an RPL assessment system has fulfilled the desired purposes, either in training organisations or within industry. Such analysis is essential if RPL is to remain separate from an assessment system.

The present report also provides an overview of the trends and extent of use of RPL at a national level from 1995 and 2001 inclusive.

The data collection requirements of the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard (AVETMISS 2001) distinguish between RPL and credit transfer. RPL is granted after an assessment or evaluation undertaken by the training provider. Credit transfer arrangements, on the other hand, allow status or credit to be given for satisfactory completion of equivalent subjects at another education or training institution such as another VET provider or a secondary school and is essentially an administrative process.

In practice, the distinction between RPL and an enrolment leading to an assessment and a pass is not clear-cut. It is probably more realistic to view RPL not only as just another form of assessment but also as a form of accelerated progression. This is the practice adopted by some providers, and as a result some RPL is recorded and reported as a 'pass'. In addition, reported RPL is affected by funding considerations, since providers in most states gain more credits from an enrolment that leads to attendance in a class. Consequently, figures for subjects granted RPL should be regarded as indicative only.

This having been said, data for 1995– 2001 show that:

4 *RPL and credit transfer are features of VET more relevant to clients seeking full qualifications and these processes are assisting these students to a higher extent.*

The incidence of both RPL and credit transfer increases with increasing Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) level:

- Of diploma and higher-level students, 10.6% in 1999 and 9.7% in 2000 had RPL subject enrolments, with a further 6.3% and 6.5% respectively having credit transfer enrolments. The rates are also well above average for students in certificate III and IV programs.
- For students in AQF certificate I or II programs, the corresponding proportions are 2.5% and 2.3% for RPL, and 1.6% and 1.5% for credit transfer, roughly a quarter of the rates for students in diploma and higher-level programs and well below the overall rates.
- RPL and credit transfer are of negligible importance for students enrolled in non-award and subject-only programs, and programs leading to a recognised qualification outside the AQF.

5 *Among the range of factors which affect RPL and credit transfer rates, age appears to be the second in importance after the AQF category of the program undertaken.*

- The incidence of RPL is greatest for students in the 20 to 24 and 25 to 39 age groups (in the range 4.6% to 5.1% from 1997 to 2000), followed by students aged 40 to 64 years, where the rate has been consistently close to the overall rate. The rate for young people up to 19 years of age is lower than for older students, in the range 2.5% to 2.6% from 1997 to 2000, in contrast to an overall rate in the range 3.6% to 4.0% in these years.

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- ◇ The incidence of credit transfer among the age groups follows a somewhat different pattern, being greatest for 20 to 24 year olds (4.2% in 1999, 4.0% in 2000), followed by young people up to the age of 19 years (3.1% in 1999, 3.0% and 2000), then students aged 25 to 39 years (2.4% in 1999 and 2000) and lowest for students aged 40 to 64 years (1.6% in 1999 and 2000).

6 *Providers are offering RPL and credit transfer in differing amounts.*

The proportion of students with RPL subjects is highest in the TAFE sector, and this has been consistently the case (5.0% of students in 1998 and 1999, 4.3% in 2000). The proportion of students with RPL in the private provider sector is lower than in the TAFE sector, but has grown much more rapidly, from 0.9% in 1996 to 2.6% in 2000. The incidence of RPL is lowest in the community provider sector, probably because completion of recognised qualifications appears to be even less important for community provider students than in the other two sectors.

7 *Qualitative research is required to determine whether the current services offered by VET providers recognise the full extent of RPL and credit transfer entitlements among VET students.*

In the early 1990s the need to promote RPL and credit transfer arrangements in the VET system was of sufficient concern for it to be included as one of the national goals for VET in the first ANTA national strategy. Since then, both RPL and credit transfer have been progressively taken up and integrated into the standard operations of VET providers in the public system. While there is still some debate around how RPL should be assessed, funded and reported, and whether credit transfer should attract some funding also, the situation has been reached where RPL and credit transfer arrangements are now much more a part of the standard operations of the VET system than was the case a decade ago. None-the-less, this does not obviate the need for a better understanding of the scope and effectiveness of RPL and credit transfer arrangements, among all VET providers, not just those in the public system.

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ISBN 1 74096 079 3 web edition

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